Network your way to an equine career

Careers evenings provide an opportunity for those wanting to find out more about working in a particular area of practice to network with potential employers. Ben Mayes describes an event to be held at this year’s BEVA congress.

LAST year, for the first time, the British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) held a careers evening as part of its congress in Birmingham. The event proved successful and is to be repeated at this year’s congress, which is again being held at the ICC in Birmingham, from September 8 to 11.

Several practices and practice groups took part in the inaugural event, and over 100 young vets and final-year students attended. The evening was lively and informative, and provided an excellent chance for students and recent graduates to find out about existing job opportunities within exhibiting practices, and what employers are looking for. It also provided time for some to discuss the ups and downs of their first job, and for interns and residents to explore their next career move.

Equine practices, and mixed practices with an equine department, from across the UK have been invited to attend this year’s event, and a number have already signed up. While some of the large, established equine hospitals already take stands in the main commercial exhibition at the congress, there has, until now, been no real place for smaller equine practices to promote themselves to potential employees. At the careers evening, practices will be allowed to display a small stand and distribute literature, in return for a contribution to the costs of a ‘happy hour’ being held in the exhibition. The event is intended to provide a platform for any equine practice, however small, to raise its profile within the profession and enhance its standing in the long term. Even if a practice is not currently considering recruiting, BEVA hopes that the evening will provide a chance for practices to put themselves on the equine veterinary map and to chat to, and liaise with, the new and enthusiastic younger members of the veterinary profession.

Positive experiences
The feedback from last year’s event was very positive. Practices found the networking valuable for meeting plenty of equine vets at varying stages in their careers who, even if they were not suitable for present vacancies, might well be the ideal candidates for other positions that might arise in the future. The evening resulted in some candidates being offered formal interviews.

Wendy Furness, practice partner at the Scarsdale Vet Group, part of XL Vets, commented: ‘We found the careers evening very useful for promoting who we are, and were pleased with the opportunity that it gave people to come and talk to us, not only...’

Ben Mayes is BEVA’s junior vice-president.
about vacancies, but also about their future careers.’ Nicholas de Brauwere, head of welfare, education and rehabilitation at the Redwings Horse Sanctuary, also found the evening to be a positive experience. ‘This forum has great value, enabling employers to meet potential candidates – I chatted with at least six people who were interested in working for us – and also in allowing practices to showcase their businesses, as pathways for career development. It is a unique and valuable opportunity for young vets aiming to get a foot on the ladder of the equine veterinary world.’

Ten-minute chat

Peter Webbon qualified from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) and is currently chief executive of the Animal Health Trust (AHT). Much of his life has involved animals, for leisure as well as work, and he is committed to improving their welfare.

How did you get to where you are today?
Certainly not by following a carefully planned career route! I intended, as an undergraduate, to be a large animal practitioner, but Neil Adam, with whom I saw practice, convinced me that I should consider a PhD, and then persuaded me to buy a racehorse with a recent tendon injury. The consequence was that I did my PhD on equine tendon disease, supported by the Horserace Betting Levy Board, and was attracted to stay at the RVC when a new lectureship in radiology was created. I ultimately took on the role of director of the Selton Equine Referral Centre. In early 1996, on my way to a skiing holiday, I posted a last-minute application to join the Jockey Club as chief veterinary adviser. I was successful, became a director of the Jockey Club following the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, then chief executive of the Horseracing Regulatory Authority, before the attraction of rural Suffolk became irresistible.

Why did you join the AHT?
The AHT is a unique organisation with an international reputation. When the position as its chief executive came up I was in the process of deciding whether to apply for the role of chief executive of the newly formed British Horseracing Authority or to return to a more veterinary/scientific environment. So, in effect, I had to choose between the possibility of a fascinating job in central London or a return to my veterinary roots on the idyllic site at Lanwades Park. Suffolk won by a distance.

How do you spend a typical day?
Walking the dogs and feeding our cat, sheep, assorted chickens (and occasional pigs) are the predictable parts of my day; the rest is not. I have to try to combine the fundraising skills of Terry Wogan, the diplomacy of Henry Kissinger, the promotional ability of Max Clifford and the wisdom of King Solomon – none of which I could ever live up to.

What do you like about your job?
I am constantly amazed by the energy, ability, enthusiasm, knowledge and commitment of the Trust’s staff, at all levels, in all areas. Trying to provide them with the facilities and opportunities to do the work that they love is very satisfying, but also a big responsibility.

What do you not like?
Struggling to fund what I am convinced is the most deserving animal charity in the country. The AHT has had a profound influence on our understanding of animal disease and, therefore, our ability to diagnose, treat or prevent a range of diseases. This has had a beneficial effect on countless animals but, in spite of that, we struggle to compete in fundraising with other animal charities that, worthy as they are, may help or support only relatively few animals, but have the advantage of an immediate and powerful emotional appeal.

Why is your job important?
Reg Wooldridge, who founded the Trust in 1942, was convinced that a lack of veterinary research into farm animal diseases contributed both to unnecessary animal suffering and a reduction in their productivity. While the Trust now concentrates more on companion animals, its mission remains the same – to conduct research, improve understanding of animal diseases and disseminate the knowledge that we acquire. Because the Trust is completely independent and funded by industry groups and individuals, it is, and has to be, very responsive to the needs and requirements of its stakeholders. This means that much of the research that we do, often of outstanding scientific merit, is readily applicable to the development of new vaccines, diagnostic methods and treatments. For example, within the past 12 months we have produced two new genetic screening tests which have the potential to avoid the development of crippling blindness in 11 breeds of dogs and early death in Fell and Dale pony foals.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
The transition from veterinary clinical practice, in either an academic or practice setting, to an essentially administrative position can sometimes be frustrating. As a chief executive of a medium-sized organisation you have the opportunity to make a real difference for animals and people in a way that you probably cannot do just as an individual. Most important, you have to remember that we all spend so much time at work that, whatever we choose to do, it should be fun.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
My grandfather, who farmed 50 acres and hand milked twice a day for the whole of his life, told me not to follow in his footsteps but to become a veterinary surgeon, because ‘it was not such hard work’!

What was your proudest moment?
It’s impossible to decide between professional achievements and the huge pride and pleasure that I have felt while watching my four children develop into wonderful adults in spite of their grumpy, impatient father. However, if I have to choose one veterinary moment, seeing my name on the RVC pass list was a pretty good feeling.
Ten-minute chat

Peter Webbon

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